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## Young children's identity formation in the context of open adoption in NSW: Summary and key findings

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# Young children's identity formation in the context of open adoption in NSW: Summary and key findings

## Abstract

A review into how open adoption can support developmental outcomes and establish healthy identity formation of children was commissioned by Barnardos Australia. The focus is on children who are up to 5 years of age in out-of-home care (OOHC) for whom there is no realistic chance of restoration to their birth family or kinship care. The options facing such children, according to recent amendments in late 2014 to the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998, are either for adoption or parental responsibility of the Minister (i.e., foster care) until they are 18 years of age. Healthy identity formation refers to a number of related constructs, including the child's: acceptance of and positive regard for him/herself (self-esteem, self-concept); feeling of belonging to a family; sense of having a biological or genealogical identity; and sense of having an identity as an effective, independent person.

## Keywords

adoption, nsw, context, formation, open, findings, young, key, summary, identity, children's

## Disciplines

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## Young children's identity formation in the context of open adoption in NSW

Summary and Key Findings

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Amy studies effective advocacy for creating social change on behalf of children, and family support by organisations working with children at-risk of maltreatment and children with additional needs.



**This study was informative as it explored the experiences of children and young people in NSW who were adopted or placed for adoption before the age of 5, and how they believed their adoption experience influenced their identity.**

*Huge difference. Indescribable difference. I would not have felt the same degree of belonging. It would be like this itch that constantly reminds you that you're different or there's something that is not normal about your circumstances. So everything I was telling you before about how normal it was and how natural felt, how it was like having brown hair or being a boy, things you don't think about. That is something I would not have had if I was actually a foster child. Because every time I would look at a form or something, or at my name on a schoolbook, or someone asking about my name, and having that pointed out to me that it was different from my mother's name again and again. And no matter how much they tried to make me feel like I was part of the family, and even if they made exactly the same efforts that they have made for me, I would still be constantly reminded of that. That would have brought up insecurities and made me question more like whether I really belong, whether I was really part of the family, whether I was really the same as everybody else. And I think a child should feel like they have a family and not like they are some burden that has been thrown upon a family, that they are somehow different purely because of the biology of their birth. It's just stupid, it's actually dumb. It makes no difference if you are biologically linked or not. You have other situations, like stepparents involved, and that doesn't make a difference; so why should it in this circumstance? (S14; 23-year-old)*

# Young Children's Identity Formation in the Context of Open Adoption in NSW: An Examination of Optimal Conditions for Child Wellbeing

*what is influencing me as a person and shaping me as a person now would be my family, but also my past life... They've both had influences, but different* (S44; 13-year-old)

## Background

A review into how open adoption can support developmental outcomes and establish healthy identity formation of children was commissioned by Barnardos Australia. The focus is on children who are up to 5 years of age in out-of-home care (OOHC) for whom there is no realistic chance of restoration to their birth family or kinship care. The options facing such children, according to recent amendments in late 2014 to the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*, are either for adoption or parental responsibility of the Minister (i.e., foster care) until they are 18 years of age.

*Healthy identity formation* refers to a number of related constructs, including the child's: acceptance of and positive regard for him/herself (self-esteem, self-concept); feeling of belonging to a family; sense of having a biological or genealogical identity; and sense of having an identity as an effective, independent person.

*I didn't feel safe before I was adopted. Being adopted helped me, made me feel like safe, secure, in an actual family, not being moved around like someone being shipped, like a toy or something.* (S41; 16-year-old)

## Key Findings

- Current research strongly suggests that adoption is more beneficial for children than remaining in long-term foster care, in that it promotes a greater sense of security, stability, and belonging.
- Interviews conducted with adopted children and young people also support the notion that adoption is preferable to foster care.
- While it is clear that early adoption engenders a deep sense of belonging and acceptance, which contributes profoundly to healthy identity formation, it is not clear that long-term fostering reliably engenders these same feelings.
- Fewer placements are better for children. Adoption is associated with fewer placements when compared to long-term fostering.



# Study Methods

The report explored how open adoption can facilitate identity development and promote positive developmental outcomes for children up to 5 years of age who are adopted from OOHC. The aim of this report is to examine factors and processes influencing identity formation for children who have been adopted from care under the age of 5, and how conditions of open adoption may facilitate developmental outcomes, particularly with respect to the formation of children's identity.

This report approaches such questions in two ways. The first is by exploring what identity is, how it typically develops within an individual, how identity is related to other important constructs, and how it may be applied in the case of adoption. The second is by examining the contexts that will serve to promote identity development in adopted persons, by considering what factors promote good developmental outcomes in open adoption that may provide a basis for healthy identity development. Outcomes can be defined in terms of those that are measurable, as well as the actual experiences of adopted persons.

A literature review was conducted on what is currently known about identity, how such research can be applied to adopted persons, and how adopted persons make sense and give meaning to their experience of adoption.

The research on contexts in which open adoption leads to good developmental outcomes for adopted persons was reviewed. This included the evidence on the role of contact in meeting children's identity needs.

The study sought to expand on the

findings by focusing on the experiences of children who were adopted or placed for adoption under the age of 5 by including questions on the influence of their adoption on their identity. Interviews were conducted with young adults as adoption-related identity concerns tend to become more prevalent from late adolescence and onwards.

There were nine participants between 9 and 23 years of age: three children (all 9-year-olds); four adolescents (a 12-, a 13-, a 15-, and a 16-year-old); and two young adults (a 19- and a 23-year-old). Participants were recruited via Barnardos' existing database of individuals who were in their Find-a-Family program.



Many of the key findings are supported by the wider literature on adoption. However, this investigation is by no means conclusive for it is clear that the existing literature on identity development and outcomes for adopted persons is still sparse, and further work needs to be done particularly in relation to the Australian context.

**Children under the age of 5 in OOHC are very likely to benefit from adoption.**

Developmental outcomes tend to be best for children who are adopted early. This is most likely because they have been removed relatively quickly from harmful environments and placed in safe, stable and sustaining environments. The results of the interviews with adopted persons also suggest that early adoption (or placement for adoption) engenders a strong sense of belonging to the adoptive family. This sentiment was emphasised by virtually all of the adoptees interviewed and conveys a profound sense of identity as a member of the adopted family.

*Well, because we were so young, we didn't really know much about the whole adoption thing. But mum and dad led us through it, told us everything we needed to know, the whole family supported us and the whole adoption process. That really helped. It made us feel less different, and it helped us know that they wanted us here and they weren't only doing it because we were two random kids. Like, they actually loved us. (S08; 15-year-old)*

On the basis of existing data, between 2012 and 2013, nearly half of the children who entered OOHC were under the age of 5, whereas nearly half the children discharged from OOHC during this same period were between the ages of 15 and 17 (and hence are likely to have *matured out* of the system). Further, as of June 2013, nearly half of the 17,422 children who were in OOHC had been in continuous placement for 5 or more years. In other words, there is a significant group, both in terms of potentially good outcomes and number, for whom adoption may be suitable.

**Adoptees' access to information about their history is of profound significance for their identity formation.**

What is important for adoptees' ability to form a healthy and positive identity – including their identity as an adopted person – is that they have access to knowledge about their biological /familial history and the circumstances of their adoption. Such knowledge can come about through what they have been told by their adoptive parents, and it is clear that part of the **openness** in open adoption is realised through the exchange of information between adoptees and their adoptive parents; a process that can be supported by caseworkers and other related practitioners.

*It's cool to find out things about her, because I can then relate to like see if... things are genetically passed onto me and if I have the same traits or skills as her, it's pretty fun to know. It's pretty important. (S91; 19-year-old)*

Openness also includes opportunities for adoptees to engage in direct contact with members of their birth families in order to acquire more information about their personal history, and perhaps even verify what they have been told.

*I don't think of it much at all now, it's not so important now. I think if I didn't have it, it might be important because I wouldn't know about the circumstances of my adoption or my birth. So it's important that I know, and that as a child I was given easy access to that information so it was never a big deal. And the thoughts and insecurities that might have developed never did. It's great that I know all that stuff, even though it doesn't matter to me now. (S14; 23-year-old)*



**Contact plays an important role in supporting identity formation.**

In contrast to the secrecy of past adoptions in Australia, adoption in NSW emphasises the needs and best interests of the child, which is characterised by an open exchange of information. Open adoptions are said to be open in that they promote the discussion of adoption-related issues within adoptive families such that children can understand why their birth parents are unable to look after them and the importance of building relationships with birth family members (NSW Family and Community Services, 2011).

*It helps because if you didn't know anything about your biological parents there'd be a lot more questioning and the thought of being adopted, so yeah, I guess because we knew her and we had visitation with her, there wasn't much questioning, and we didn't have much of a problem with it. Because we saw the way she was living and the way we were living now, we were just grateful for it. (S08; 15-year-old)*

There is a pressing need for clear guidelines to ensure that contact is used to support positive experiences and outcomes for children. Contact with birth family members can serve to facilitate the formation of an adoptive identity. In most cases, contact is useful in allowing a child to maintain connections to their birth family so that they have access to information about their past, which is likely to be critical for adoptive identity formation during adolescence.

When decisions about contact are made, it is important that contact has a purpose, that the rights and best interests of the

child remain paramount, and that contact should not emphasise the rights of birth parents to have access to their biological child above the child's ordinary needs for safety, stability and protection.

*To me, it was actually. Like, the contact with my mum would make me nervous and all that stuff. Because, I would think she would take me away because she done it in the past. I wanted more contact with my biological sisters and brothers, rather than that contact with my birth mother. As an older brother, I wanted to know that they are doing well in life and not messing around. (S41; 16-year-old)*

To make appropriate decisions in this respect requires an understanding of developmentally appropriate needs of young children for safety, protection and access to the main attachment figure, or a reliable substitute, to achieve optimal self-regulation. Denying children access to relationships on which they depend for safety and security runs the risk of placing them under considerable stress or exposing them to trauma.



It is also evident that the adoptive family plays a very important role in promoting and facilitating communication between adoptive and birth families. Contact not only allows adoptees to have access to information, it creates opportunities for adoption-related concerns to be discussed within the adoptive family, which will assist the child in making sense of his or her adoption. That is to say, the level of openness with which adoptees discuss adoption-related issues with their adoptive parents is important, and contact helps to stimulate adoption-related conversations, which can further promote the development of a complete, coherent, and meaningful identity as an adopted person.

*Mum and dad used to come on access visits with me. They'd like talk, there wasn't really any rivalry or tension I don't think. I think everyone knew it was in my best interests to be adopted. (S91; 19-year-old)*

When asked how they came to know, adoptees reported that their understanding of their adoption came from their adoptive parents. In addition, when asked whether their parents had always been open about discussing information about their adoption and whether they found it helpful, **all** adoptees agreed.

*Yeah, because they answer all the questions there's not many to ask now because they teach us all about it. Now we know what's what and there's no insecurity about it. They just taught us that we're normal people, whether we're adopted or not. (S08; 15-year-old)*

### **Adoptive parents are the key to promoting their children's healthy identity formation.**

Adoptive parents play a very important, perhaps critical, role in supporting the development of their child's identity, particularly their child's identity as an adopted person who is a part of an adoptive family. The interviews with adopted persons suggests that when children are adopted or placed at a very young age they identify strongly with their adoptive family and consider their adoptive parents to be their *real* parents, even if they still have contact with members of their birth family.

*I fit fine. Obviously, I'm different from my sisters [two biological children of adoptive parents, and one adopted from a different family]. But they're different from each other too. I think it's quite normal for family members to be different from one another. I definitely feel like I fit in. (S14; 23-year-old)*

The adoptive family serves as an important source of information about their child's adoption. That is, what appears to be vital for the development of children's identity as an adopted person is the level of **communicative openness** within adoptive families (i.e., how often adoption-related conversations occur and how much they are encouraged/supported), rather than the level of openness between adoptive and birth families per se (e.g., how much contact actually occurs). Contact with birth family members may be useful, important and even desirable, but what seems most important for children's healthy identity formation is the ability of adoptive parents to support their children's developmental journey to understand, accept and perhaps also embrace their identity as an adopted person.

## Identity as an adopted person

With development, children's understanding of adoption changes and will influence their desire for certain information depending on the developmental stage they are in. While preschoolers are able to refer to themselves as being adopted, they have limited understanding of what that term actually means. During middle childhood, 6 to 12 years, children have developed better problem-solving and perspective-taking skills. The improvement of their logical thinking skills also entails the understanding that belonging to an adoptive family means being separated from their birth family.

During adolescence, adoptees have a further advanced understanding of others' thoughts and feelings, so have a better grasp of their birth parents' situation. Further, they begin to understand the social implications and attitudes of their adoptive status, as they begin to establish their identity.

*Um, I know that why I got adopted. I think she was sick, and she couldn't um look after me. Yep. (S28; 9-year-old)*

Adoptees who remembered their adoption also described the sense of security they had in finally being adopted.



*Yeah, I remember. I remember the day clearer than I remember anything else. It was pretty much, in the morning I woke up like I was really nervous but excited. On the car ride there, like, even nowadays, the work that I'm working with now, it's in Sydney. So even when I drive there, certain places I remember from the drive to the adoption. I remember the roads and all that to where it is. [How old were you then?] I think 7. We got to stamp the papers, that gave me a sense of relief and more safe. Brought more safety into me. More feeling like I can be more secure, not worrying that anyone could come in and take us out. (S41; 16-year-old)*

When asked what being an adopted person meant to them, adoptees reported that they viewed themselves as special or chosen.

*I guess I feel like I've been chosen rather than... like... I guess I was an accident at first, but then I was chosen, so I feel pretty special knowing that, and that my parents went through so much to get me. That's always felt special to me (S91; 19-year-old)*

Adoptees reported that being adopted gave them a second chance and opportunities they would not otherwise be exposed to if they had not been adopted, as well as the fact that they would be an entirely different person.

*Being adopted, I was given opportunities, reasons to live, and reasons to be a good person. If I hadn't been given that, I would have a longing for the things I didn't have, and felt deprived, and fallen into a category into a deprived person who didn't have opportunities and sought to make my own opportunities through ways that are not legal or very nice. I think I would have quite likely become a criminal. (S14; 23-year-old)*

## Summary of Conclusions

- *The benefits of early open adoption should be accepted as a guiding principle in making decisions in the best interests of children for whom restoration or kin care is not possible.*
- *Further studies will be needed to examine the practices and procedures in the NSW legislative environment that will serve to support the development of children in open adoptions.*
- *More work is needed to determine how such children can be efficiently identified and to address the slow uptake of open adoption as a permanent placement decisions.*
- *Future research needs to examine the characteristics and circumstances of individuals who have chosen to remain in long-term foster care, or who have benefited from such arrangements, in order to make better informed decisions about which permanent placement is most appropriate for a given child.*
- *There is a need for empirical investigations into the nature of the information provided to children and young people at different ages so that it can act as a strong foundation when identity concerns become significant.*
- *Research that examines how contact can best meet the changing interests of the child should be a priority, to provide a more complete picture of how practices of open adoption can support identity formation.*
- *Future studies are needed to examine how the beliefs and attitudes of adoptive parents can best support the development of their child's sense of who they are, where they belong, and what it means to be an adopted person.*
- *Further emphasis is needed on the contributions that both adoptive and biological siblings have on adoptees' sense of belonging.*

*My adopted family is much more a family than anyone that I am blood-related to. And adoption has shown me that. I think family is those who have always been there for you and I don't think it has to be through blood that you consider people family. There's a quote, and it's often misquoted, the blood is thicker than water quote. That's not actually the quote. It's actually the blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb. Which means like those people who you've been through hard trials and hard times with, and stuck with you, they are closer to you, and more family than those born with blood. I agree with that, that those who've always stuck by you, cared for you, are more family than anyone else. (S91; 19-year-old)*





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